

July 7, 1997

Mr. Decker Anstrom  
Mr. Eddie Fritts  
Mr. Jack Valenti  
c/o The National Cable Television Association  
1724 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Anstrom, Mr. Fritts and Mr. Valenti:

As the principal House authors of the V-Chip law, we are aware of the major revisions in the Television Parental Guidelines System that you are developing in consultation with parent advocacy groups and are writing to indicate our interest in helping this endeavor succeed.

As you know, we have been concerned for some time that the voluntary industry ratings system announced in December would not be sufficient to allow parents to block programming on the basis of violent, sexual or profane content. In February 1996, when the TV industry announced that it would voluntarily develop a TV ratings system to work with the V-Chip, we were hopeful that this initial effort would result in a consensus between industry and parents groups about how best to approach this project. But late last year, as the industry prepared to unveil its age-based system, it became clear that the age-based icons proposed by the industry would not convey the necessary information concerning objectionable violence, sex and language, and the system would therefore deny parents the ability to block programming on the basis of such content.

For this reason, we began working closely with the family groups, educators and others to pursue new legislative initiatives regarding TV ratings, and we simultaneously participated in the rulemaking at the Federal Communications Commission concerning the implementation of the V-Chip and the acceptability of the ratings system. We remained hopeful that these new initiatives or more intrusive involvement by the FCC would be unnecessary, but we felt obliged to move forward if the TV industry did not amend its ratings system to identify content.

Your recent decision to renew discussions with parents groups over how to add content to the age-based system was most welcome. We understand that you are now near an agreement on a revised system which, if implemented, will give parents the information and the means they need to supervise their children's television viewing and to exercise blocking choices using the V-Chip.

Therefore, assuming your negotiations are completed to the satisfaction of both sides, we intend to call upon the FCC to move expeditiously to find the revised guidelines "acceptable" as defined by the Telecommunications Act. In addition, we will urge the FCC to make the revised guidelines the mandated system for the manufacture of V-Chip-equipped television sets sold in this country.

We also recognize that this new system will take time to find acceptance in the marketplace. It is more complex than the original system, and it will take the industry time to learn to implement it in a consistent fashion. In addition, parents will need time to learn the system's design and how the industry plans to apply it to the hundreds of television programs it will cover.

The FCC has yet to set a deadline by which new television sets must include the V-Chip, although by law it can be no earlier than February 8, 1998. We believe it will take an additional 18 months to two years after the V-Chip-equipped sets appear in stores for enough American families to have purchased these new sets for it to be possible to judge whether the new system is working as intended - by

empowering American parents -- not the government or industry -- to determine which shows they want coming into their homes.

Consequently, we are recommending to our colleagues in the Congress that in the event a mutually-acceptable agreement is reached between the industry and parents groups and implemented in good faith, we not enact new legislation or regulations designed to influence the airing of controversial content (through, e.g., television ratings, content or scheduling). We are recommending that this assurance span a period of three years starting October 1, 1997 (the starting date for the new Television Parental Guidelines System) and that it apply to all those channels and networks who participate by providing the new ratings on their programming.

Thank you for working to find a mutually acceptable answer to a difficult problem. We look forward to the completion of an agreement and to its successful implementation.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey  
Dan Burton  
James P. Moran  
John M. Spratt, Jr.